

1.0 Introduction

1.1 PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Union Pacific Railroad, hereafter referred to by the acronym UPRR, is proposing to construct a new second mainline track, wholly within its existing right-of-way, between Kelso and Cima, California, a distance of 19 miles (Figure 1-1). For purposes of this document, Cima is considered the northern project limit and Kelso the southern limit. The proposed project is located within the Mojave National Preserve (the “Preserve”), managed by the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service (NPS). Currently, there is a single mainline track with five siding tracks spaced along this corridor, all of which are located adjacent to and east of the existing mainline track.

The Amtrak Desert Wind passenger service originated in Chicago and passed through Omaha, Denver, Salt Lake City, and Las Vegas, before terminating in Los Angeles. Amtrak discontinued service in May 1997 due to low ridership. According to the Desert Wind timetable, the travel time between Los Angeles and Las Vegas was 7 hours and 15 minutes. The trains often ran over an hour late due to conflicts with freight traffic on the UPRR owned tracks. The proposed project will run only between Los Angeles and Las Vegas and will cut one and a half hours off the Desert Wind schedule, making the trip in six hours. Service is expected to have increased on-time reliability, as many conflicts with freight train schedules will be eliminated by construction of the proposed project. The faster trip time combined with the increase on-time performance is expected to provide people traveling between the two cities a viable alternative to driving or flying.

In order to implement this passenger service cost effectively, the proposed service must run in an existing rail corridor that will require only minimal capacity improvements. The only existing rail corridor linking Los Angeles and Las Vegas is the UPRR corridor, in which this project is located. In order to provide efficient passenger service, capacity improvements for passenger trains along the section of track between Kelso and Cima must be implemented. Train operations modeling done by the UPRR in 1998 identified the section of track between Kelso and Cima (Cima Hill) as the bottleneck in the plan to reinstate passenger service to the corridor. The railroad grade between Kelso and Cima averages 2.2 percent, rising over 2,000 feet in elevation within 20 miles, which reduces northbound freight speeds to under 20 miles per hour. Minimizing passenger train run-times between Los Angeles and Las Vegas, which is imperative to satisfy existing demand and attract riders, necessitates that passenger trains be able to travel along the corridor unimpeded by slower freights. Construction of a new second mainline would provide a passing lane for the passenger trains over the Cima Hill. Following construction of the proposed project, up to two passenger trains per day would travel along this route, which currently supports 35 freight trains per day.

Due to the project’s location within the Preserve, the NPS is the lead federal agency for this project. The proposed federal action evaluated in this Environmental Assessment (EA) is the approval and issuance of a Special Use Permit by the NPS for the right to use roads within the Preserve in order to access the project. The use of these roads can be considered as generally provided for by the UPRR Right-of-Way Grant of 1906, subject to the management of public lands within the context of the NPS Organic Act of 1916 and the California Desert Protection Act of 1994. More specifically, since public lands that could be affected by the proposed federal

action lie within the Preserve, possible consequences of granting the Special Use Permit must be evaluated in relation to the General Management Plan for Preserve.

1.2 PURPOSE AND NEED OF PROJECT

The need for this project stems from high levels of automobile traffic congestion on Interstate-15 (I-15) due in part to a lack of transportation options between Los Angeles and Las Vegas. In order to provide another travel option, the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak) has proposed to reintroduce passenger rail service between Los Angeles, California and Las Vegas, Nevada. The federal action is necessary to achieve the objectives of the project: 1) to reinstate passenger rail service on the UPRR tracks between Los Angeles and Las Vegas; 2) to promote the restoration of Mojave National Preserve lands consistent with the long term goals of preservation for NPS lands; and 3) to respond to UPRR's proposal to construct a new second mainline track between Kelso and Cima. Construction of a new second mainline would provide a passing lane for the passenger trains over the Cima Hill.

Figure 1.1 – Project Vicinity Map

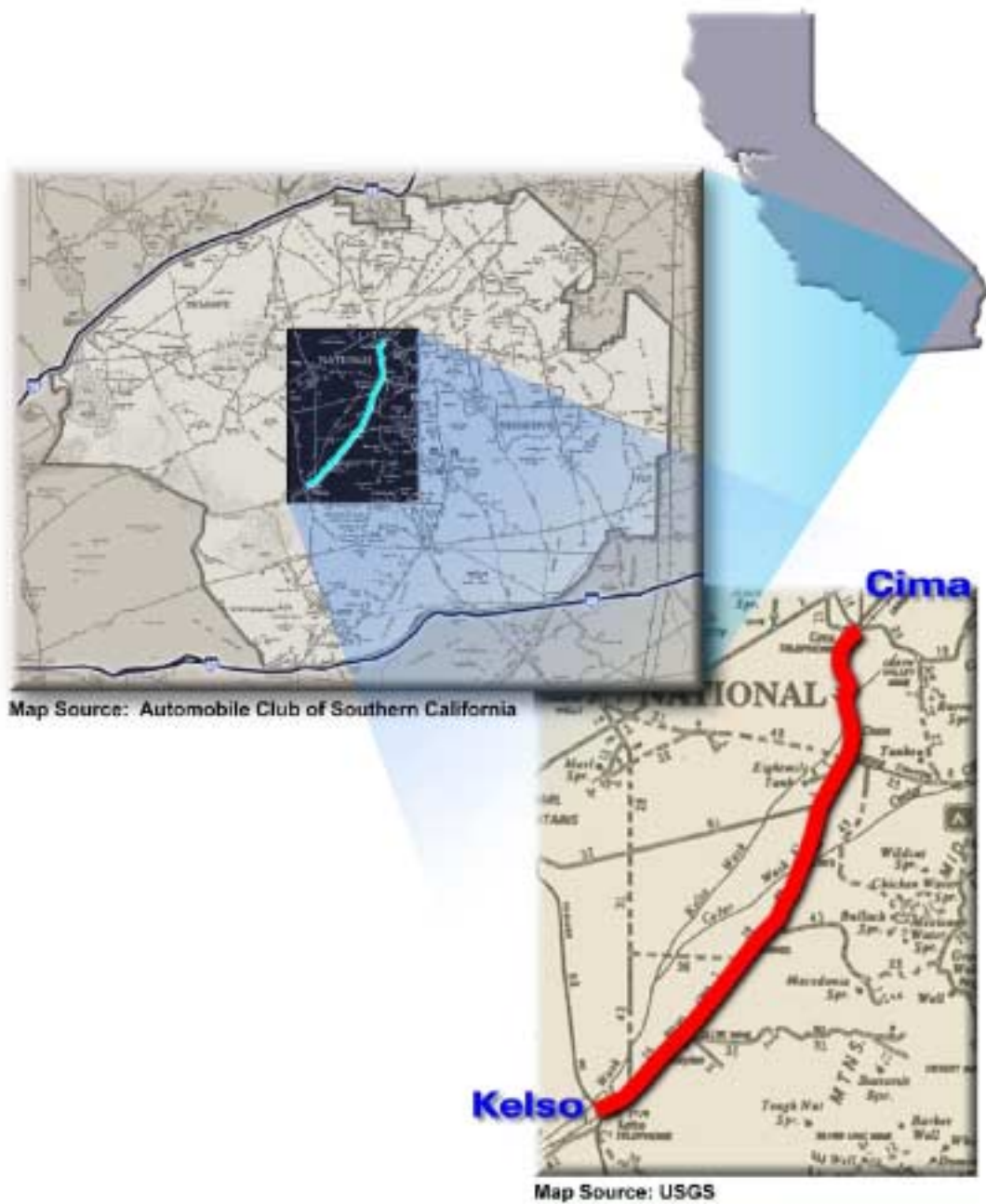


Figure 1-1
Vicinity Map
Kelso to Cima
UPRR New Second Mainline
June 2001

1.3 SCOPE OF THIS ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Constructing the proposed project would require that the NPS issue a Special Use Permit to UPRR for the use of the Preserve roads to access the project site. This constitutes a federal action with the potential for causing impacts to the human and natural environment. Therefore, the action must comply with requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (Public Law 91-190) (NEPA). This EA evaluates potential impacts of the federal action, including potential impacts of any connected actions, as required by 40 CFR 1500-1508. The NPS office in Barstow, California is the lead NPS office for these purposes.

Accordingly, a Biological Assessment (BA) has been prepared to address potential impacts upon federally listed and proposed T&E species and their critical habitat. The BA was submitted to the USFWS for Section 7 consultation on May 29, 2001.

A detailed Construction Operations Plan outlining the construction methods, construction work plan, the construction impact and avoidance measures, and a Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan was prepared for the proposed project under coordination between the NPS, USFWS, and the UPRR. The impact and avoidance measures first detailed in the Construction Operations Plan have been wholly incorporated into this document as Section 2.1.2. The Construction Operations Plan, the Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan, and the complete engineering drawings for the proposed project, are on file in NPS offices in Barstow, CA.

The Proposed Action and No Action alternatives are discussed in Section 2.0 of this EA. The existing environment in which the proposed project will be constructed is described in Section 3.0. Environmental consequences and proposed avoidance measures for the proposed project and the no-action alternative are evaluated in Section 4.0. The environmental analysis focuses on areas encompassed by the proposed federal action. The discussion of cumulative impacts considers the effects of the proposed action combined with other existing and reasonably foreseeable projects and facilities in the project area. Agency scoping and coordination efforts are summarized in Section 5.0, followed by Section 6.0, List of Preparers, and Section 7.0, Resources Sited.